

VZCZCXRO7936
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHDS #2155/01 2461403
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 031403Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6103
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEPADJ/CJTF HOA
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUZEFAA/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 002155

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/08/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [EAGR](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DYNAMICS OF THE AFAR REGION

Classified By: ADCM Michael C. Gonzales for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) A visit by PolOff to eastern Amhara and southwest Afar regions in late August sheds light on the political and economic dynamics of this geographically important region bordering Djibouti. Opposition political parties reported multiple cases of harassment and intimidation, and are cynical about the prospect of a free and fair national election in 2010. Some Afari people expressed dissatisfaction with the regional administration which they consider inept, corrupt, and fiercely loyal to the ruling party. In meetings with PolOff, government officials routinely discounted problems the region faced, as demonstrated by the South Wollo Zonal Administrator's comment "there are no problems in our zone, and everything is good and smooth." The Afari Regional President feels the U.S. is neglecting development in the region, and expressed strong disappointment in what he perceived as a broken promise by the U.S. in not realizing the Afambo bridge project. Failed rains have resulted in a shortage of grazing land, causing pastoralists around Awash to illegally graze their livestock in the Awash National Park. Recently-built government-owned dams and sugar plantation/factory have caused some competition for resources between the government and Afari people, forcing some Afaris to relocate. There is some controversy over whether the Afaris were adequately compensated and whether the projects are in the best interests of the Afari people. End Summary.

2. (C) PolOff and FSN Political Specialist visited the towns of Dessie, Semera, Awash, and Adama between August 24 and 28. EmbOffs met with opposition political parties, local and regional administrators, religious leaders, a former government official, and an Ethiopian Human Rights Council representative. EmbOffs also visited a DRL-funded "Hope for Women" project in Chifra woreda, Afar region.

Violating Freedom of Association; Cynicism About Elections

3. (C) Opposition Afar Liberation Front Party (ALFP) Deputy Chairman Mohammed Yayu told PolOff that he does not meet openly with party members for fear of persecution by police and regional security officials. He said that ALFP members or suspected supporters are routinely harassed, beaten, and periodically arrested by police and security officials in an attempt to recruit them as members of the Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP), an affiliate of the ruling EPRDF coalition. He expressed doubt that the 2010 national election would be free and fair, and was hesitant to campaign in the next election for fear of endangering his supporters.

Opposition Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) representatives in Dessie said that they fully expect to be beaten, arrested, and possibly killed by police if they engage in campaigning for the election. But, they are confident that the people will "vote with their hearts" and that UDJ will win provided polling stations are not manipulated.

¶4. (C) Former Afar government official Here Hamedo (strictly protect - currently works for the United Nations) and ALFP's Mohammed Yayu told PolOff that the regional government is largely viewed as inept, corrupt, and ineffective in developing the region. He acknowledged that while in the past the Afar region was neglected, it now has its own budget and receives subsidies from the federal government. However, he argued that the money is squandered by local officials. In describing the Afar regional government's ineptitude, he said "It's like when people invite you to their house for dinner, give you meat, but don't give you a knife to cut the meat." Mohammed added that while the federal government knows the regional government is inept, it does not take action because regional officials are intensely loyal to ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

¶5. (C) The UDJ party currently has one office in the South Wollo Zone and 640 registered members. (NOTE: UDJ representatives told PolOff they use code names to register members to protect them from harassment. End Note.) In February, Chairman of the UDJ Dessie branch, Endris Seid, opened an office in Haik woreda. Immediately following the

ADDIS ABAB 00002155 002 OF 004

opening ceremony, he was picked up by police, beaten, and arrested. After being held for three days, he was charged with failing to notify authorities of the opening, though UDJ representatives claim that authorities were notified and permission was granted. Endris was released on bail after being held for three days, and the case remains pending. Following the incident federal police and National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) officials summoned UDJ executive members to their offices individually to question them about their party members and activities. In July, UDJ's lease for the Haik office expired. UDJ representatives said that due to intense police harassment, the landlord refused to renew their contract and subsequently the office closed.

Human Rights Council Investigator Arrested

¶6. (C) In early July, Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO - arguably the most prominent human rights organization in Ethiopia) investigator Mulugeta Fentaw was harassed and arrested by local police after investigating alleged cases of harassment of UDJ members in a town near Dessie. PolOff met with Mulugeta while in Dessie to get first-hand details about the case. Following an interview with UDJ members, while waiting at a bus stop, Mulugeta said that woreda official Makonnen Hussein stole his notebook and allegedly passed it to woreda Head of Finance and Economic Development, Mohammed Haji. Immediately following the incident, police accused Mulugeta of stealing 2,000 birr and arrested him. At the police station he was searched, and when police found only 200 birr in his possession, they modified the charge to claim that he stole only 200 birr. Mulugeta was imprisoned for three days. The judge sentenced him to eight months in prison, but he appealed to the high court which dismissed the case. The woreda administration appealed and brought another charge of "tarnishing the reputation of woreda officials by bringing false witnesses." Mulugeta again appealed to the high court, which dismissed the case. One of Mulugeta's defense witnesses, Alemu Abaineh, was arrested a couple of days after testifying in court. He was accused of stealing hand and anti-tank grenades and plotting to attack the militia. He was sentenced to four years of imprisonment. He

appealed to the high court and was released on bail. The trial is ongoing.

Afari Leadership Loyal to Ruling Party

17. (C) According to former Afar government official Here Hamedo (strictly protect), Afari discontent with the regional government is growing as they feel they are "colonized by the Tigrayans." Here told PolOff that three people hold power in Afar - the Regional President, the EPRDF Party Chief, and the Head of Regional Security. He said the regional administration is dominated by Afaris from the northern part of the region bordering the Tigray region. Regional President Ismail Ali Sero reportedly fought alongside the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) freedom fighters during the liberation struggle, and some of his family members are Tigrayan. Here added that membership to the EPRDF-Affiliate ANDP confers benefits such as preference for government jobs and promotions on party loyalists.

18. (C) South Wollo (Amhara) Zonal Administrator Seyoum Mekonnen told PolOff that there are "no problems in our zone, and everything is good and smooth." When asked about the issue of narrowing political space, he said that this was an issue to be discussed with the federal government, and that it was "not our concern right now. The main issue is development and addressing the needs of the people." He claimed that population control in his zone is not a major problem since families are dependent on farm labor and can use their numerous children to help out in the fields. Commenting on Business Process Re-Engineering (BPR), a Government-wide initiative to promote reform in government institutions, Seyoum said the purpose was to eliminate bureaucracy and reduce time and resources needed to solve problems. He assured PolOff that BPR "has no hidden objective." BPR will be fully implemented in September, when the testing phase is completed. While PolOff was visiting Dessie, a BPR training workshop was underway and all government offices were closed until the end of August.

Afari President Feels Neglected by U.S.

ADDIS ABAB 00002155 003 OF 004

19. (C) In a discussion with PolOff, Afar Regional President Ismail Ali Sero claimed that the U.S. reneged on promised support for the Afambo Bridge Project. (Note: He claimed that Ambassador Brazeal promised support for the bridge during a visit a few years ago. End Note.) He said the Afar regional government has several development projects ready to be implemented, but feels neglected by the U.S., which he feels does not pay adequate attention to the Afar region. While he admitted that the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) was helping somewhat, he complained that a diet of wheat alone was not balanced, and that some people got hurt on the job in the "food for work" program but were not adequately compensated. PolOff observed that the Afar Regional President drives a government vehicle with blue United Nations (UN) license plates. One trusted source told PolOff that the government uses UN plates to surveil the region undetected. Ismail told PolOff that there is no bureaucracy in Afar and an egalitarian mentality prevails, citing as evidence the fact that Afaris call him by his first name. Security into the government offices was tight and PolOff waited 15 minutes for permission to enter the government office compound. On tribal conflict, Ismail said that the likelihood of conflict is very low due to the similarities between the clans and the old cultural system of elders resolving disputes. He insisted that the Afari people support U.S. anti-terrorism efforts, and said that the Afari regional government "scolded the Eritreans" for the 2007 kidnapping of British diplomats and sent Afari elders to help resolve the issue.

¶10. (C) Awash Fentale Woreda Administrator Loita Konte said that the failed rains have resulted in serious problems for Afaris because there is a shortage of grazing land for animals. This has led many Afari pastoralists from the surrounding woredas to graze their livestock in the Awash National Park. Although they know it is illegal (the park has existed for over 40 years), he said Afaris are breaking the law in desperation. Park rangers occasionally wrangle trespasser's cattle and demand a fine of ten birr per animal.

This problem has intensified in the past year due to a significant decrease of rain compared with last year, with almost no rain in April, May, or June. The scarcity of grazing land has also caused sporadic conflicts between the Afaris and the Kereya tribe from Oromiya, as the Kereya are creeping into Afari grazing lands. (Note: Most tribal conflicts reportedly occur in the central region of Afar bordering Oromiya. End Note.) The failed rains have affected the northern Afar region the worst, as the pastoralists were already weakened by the heavy loss of livestock during the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. Also, the lack of water affects animal breeding cycles, resulting in decreased livestock reproduction rates.

Government Projects Receive Mixed Reviews

¶11. (C) A major government-owned sugar plantation and two dam investments along the Awash valley have recently been completed in the Afar region and a sugar cane processing plant is being built. Several Afari farmers (cultivating papaya and oranges) were displaced to make room for the government projects, but government officials claim that adequate compensation was awarded. However, several people told PolOff that while the farmers were compensated, it was not adequate to offset the loss of means of livelihood for the farmers. Though the sugar cane factory (expected to be completed within three years) may create some jobs, most of the jobs are feared to be given to Tigrayans to "dilute the population," according to former Afar government official Here Hamedo (strictly protect). (Note: According to Here, the majority of employees at the Lake Abderra salt mining plant in Afar are Tigrayan. Also, most of the dam construction workers are reportedly Tigrayan. End Note.) According to Afar Regional President Ismail Ali Sero, the dams provide several benefits to the region such as preventing floods and preserving water to ration at a later time. Also, he claims that once completed, the dams will provide thousands of locals with jobs. He added that downstream farmers were paid adequate compensation, and people whose houses were flooded as a result of the dams were

ADDIS ABAB 00002155 004 OF 004

moved to better houses provided by the government. Many worry about the dam's potentially negative impact on the flora/fauna and ecological system of the Awash valley.

Afar Pastoralist Way of Life Challenged

¶12. (C) Former Afar government official Here Hamedo (strictly protect) argued that the pastoralist lifestyle in Afar is threatened due to drought and competition for scarce resources. Awash Fentale Woreda Administrator Loita Konte said that currently there is a difficult transition period where people have been displaced (due to government sugar cane plantation and dam projects) and lost their livelihoods, but that the situation will soon improve. The government plans to give the farmers replacement land with irrigation channels, though this could take a year or two to develop. Also, once the sugar factory is operational it will provide alternative employment to some Afaris. He claimed the Afari community had been consulted when deciding to build the dam and sugar cane plantations and that after intense debate, the

Afaris were convinced the projects would help the region. Here Hamedo and an opposition party representative, however, argue the Afari community was not consulted.

DRL-funded "Hope for Women" Project

¶13. (U) PolOff visited DRL-funded Project Concern International (PCI) "Hope for Women" project in Chifra Woreda, met with the project advisory committee (relevant stakeholders- local administrators and self-help beneficiaries), and observed a self-help cooperative training meeting. Stakeholders were very positive about the project and appreciated U.S. help to improve their community. The local Muslim leader told PolOff that the "Hope for Women" project has educated him on the harmful effects of female genital mutilation and early marriage, and "compared with other organizations the PCI project has really made an impact because of its close coordination with stakeholders." The project has made a significant difference in the lives of Chifra residents in this underserved region, and all stakeholders expressed a desire to continue the project.

Comment

¶14. (C) The insistence of local and regional government officials to deny the existence of problems in the region and stick to the party line in meetings with PolOff suggest that they rely heavily on directives from the federal government. Even in this remote and traditionally neglected region of Ethiopia, the ruling EPRDF seemed to have a firm hold on power. The Afari regional government officials' perceived loyalty to the ruling party, and hence the perception that they did not have Afari interests at heart, seemed to be causing increasing discontent among the people. The Afaris are considered to be fierce warriors by the Ethiopian populace, and one only has to look around to see that they are well-armed (most men carry Kalashnikovs, spears, or large knives everywhere they go.) Scarcity of adequate grazing land caused by failed rains could challenge the traditional Afari pastoralist nomadic lifestyle. Poor rains and scarce resources, combined with increasing discontent and frustration with the government, suggest a volatile situation emerging in the Afar region. End Comment.
MEECE